

HEALTH

# Losing Weight When Your Partner Isn't On Board

Experts provide tips for how to negotiate the situation

By [Brette Sember](#) September 12, 2019



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After years of dieting, losing a little and gaining more, I got serious about weight loss at age 50 and lost 40 pounds. When I started this journey, my loving husband, who also needs to lose weight, told me he'd rather eat ice cream every day and die five years sooner than diet.

Trying to lose weight when your partner either doesn't need to [for health reasons](#) or is just not interested can lead to some tricky relationship situations. It can also make it hard to stay on track with your own weight-loss goals.

## The Buddy System

A partner, friend or family member can be helpful in weight loss, particularly when that person is also trying to lose weight, says Rene' Dailey, associate professor of communication studies at the University of Texas at Austin, who led a study about partners and weight loss.

Working together is what Dailey calls "synchronization," and says when you and your partner can join in a goal for weight loss, you're more likely to be successful.



**"There's food at the house I wouldn't otherwise have in the house, like cookies or cupcakes that I can't eat."**

If you're trying to lose weight and would like your partner to join you, it's easy to find yourself trying to do it through motivation or convincing. However, that's a mistake, says psychotherapist Eliza Kingsford, CEO and founder of Empowered Wellness, which operates weight-loss programs in Santa Barbara, Calif.

"You will never be able to force that motivation on your partner if they do not want to change. Your partner must want to commit to changing their lifestyle and you should never try to do it for them," Kingsford says.

Dr. Scott Kahan, director of the National Center for Weight and Wellness, a weight loss clinic in Washington, D.C., says it's important to support your partner's autonomy and decisions. If your loved one doesn't want to lose weight, you can't cajole the person into it.

Kahan suggests that you can point out how weight loss could help your partner be more able to do enjoyable things, such as have more energy to play with grandkids or not get winded playing tennis. But ultimately, it's up to the individual, he says.

## Negative Impacts on Relationships

When one partner loses weight and the other doesn't, it can lead to serious relationship problems. A recent study by North Carolina State University found that when one partner lost 30 or more pounds, that [had a negative impact on the relationship](#), causing arguments about food, as well as nagging and resentment.

A study in the *Journal of the American Medicine Association* found that weight loss surgery led to an [increased rate of divorce](#) (41% higher than in other marriages).

Kingsford explains that relationship issues connected to one partner's weight loss are caused "largely due to the fact that one partner is evolving and changing and the other partner is staying the same. This is difficult in any relationship. But with weight, there is a visual representation of this change."

She suggests that communication is essential to navigating the situation. Talk about what you're thinking and feeling so your partner can be part of your growth process. If you can grow together, you're less likely to grow apart.

## Managing Food Preferences at Home

One common problem for people in relationships — especially if they live together — is that the person who is not trying to lose weight brings food into the house that is [detrimental to the other person's weight-loss plan](#).

For example, Joe Wooden, 55, of Baltimore, has lost 25 pounds with his weight-loss and exercise plan, but his wife Laurie doesn't need to lose weight. "There's food at the house I wouldn't otherwise have in the house, like cookies or cupcakes that I can't eat," Wooden says.

The best way to navigate this situation is to "start by acknowledging that they have the right to eat whatever they want," Kahan says. Then, ask for support.

"Even if he or she is not able to commit to keeping junk foods out of the house, putting them in a place that is not front and center in the kitchen can be helpful, such as on a lower (or higher) shelf and hidden behind other items," he adds.

## Dealing With Criticism

You might find your partner trying to "help" you make better choices, which can make you feel criticized. Wooden says his wife sometimes will ask him things like "Should you be eating that? Should you be eating so late?" It makes me feel bad," he says.

Dailey recommends trying to "react positively to [your] partner's suggestions for healthier choices. For example, if you have asked your partner to help you make time for your workout, don't be critical when they suggest you take your daily walk."

## Negotiating Lifestyle Changes

Your [weight loss journey](#) will likely create changes that impact your lifestyle as a couple. Wooden says, "We don't go out to eat as often, so we don't socialize with friends as much as we used to."

Dailey recommends talking about the impact of your effort on your life together. If your partner wants to maintain a certain lifestyle, such as frequently eating out, look for a compromise — maybe a restaurant with healthier options.

"It's not always easy to negotiate mutually acceptable solutions when the partners have different goals. But individuals trying to lose weight could see where their partners are willing to change," she says.

## How Your Partner Can Support You

Wooden's wife, Laurie, admits she feels guilty that her husband is trying so hard to lose weight when she doesn't need to and can continue to enjoy treats. Her solution: "I try to turn the guilt back into support for him, like joining him for a walk in ninety-five-plus degrees when I really don't want to, but he needs to," she says.

Dailey notes that getting some kind of acceptance or validation from your partner is important for staying on track. "Messages such as 'I know exercising every day is hard, but I know you can do it' are likely more effective than 'Quit complaining and do it!'" she says.

The bottom line to weight loss success is to "avoid equating weight with appearance, or weight loss with morality," Kahan says. "Avoid value judgments — both of your spouse and others, as well as self-judgments."

Focusing on your own goals and not judging yourself or your partner will help you stay on track.



By [Brette Sember](#)

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